

Estimates keep climbing for the damage caused by Hurricane Sandy, both in lives and dollars. It's hard to imagine the destruction in a community where a wall of wind and water submerges tens of thousands of homes, knocking out power, communications, emergency response and the local economy.

Sandy touched millions of Americans, and will likely have taken more than 100 lives and cost nearly \$100 billion in damage before the final tally is made.

We have suffered grave disasters in Missouri in the last few years: tornadoes, drought, floods and ice storms. We may not know exactly what the victims of Hurricane Sandy are experiencing, but we sure know what they are feeling. They are frustrated, angry, hurt and they feel all alone.

They are not alone. Our churches have been filled with prayers for the victims. Our charities have been collecting selfless donations, large and small -- but each one meaningful and heartfelt. In the days and weeks ahead, communities will pull together. They will clean up after the storm, and they will make known their needs for assistance from all over the country where resources are at the ready.

We all know the recovery process can be long. In Missouri, residents are still working to come back from floods 18 months ago and tornadoes two years past. Ranchers are still feeling the acute effects of a drought that lasted all summer long. These disasters are not just a memory; they are a part of the daily challenge of trying to get back to normal -- the way things were the day before disaster struck.

The fresh hurt caused by Hurricane Sandy has a silver lining: we can grow in our national understanding of how important it is to help communities recover from natural disasters. We can feel some empathy, and we can align our experiences in an effort to make sure that all Americans have the support of the nation when a storm hits. Whether federal, state or local resources are being brought to bear on a disaster, we have a national responsibility to pick up our neighbor when times are toughest.

Surely, there will be many opportunities to express our support for Hurricane Sandy's victims in the near future. But we are under just as powerful an obligation to stick with them for the long haul. The next time disaster strikes in Missouri, we will be asking those same people to understand what we are going through, and to lend us a hand.

In Congress, my responsibility is to make sure the voices of Missourians who have been afflicted by national disasters are heard during times like these. I will be doing my part to aid the response to East Coast communities which are in dire straits today, but I will also be working to advance the case of Missourians who are still in need of assistance after the drought and floods and storms in our own state. By strengthening the programs designed to lead that first, fastest disaster response, we can assure that the next Americans to need help will get it – no matter where they live or what form the tragedy takes.

Preparedness is always important, at the individual and the community levels, but it is also critical at the national level. Our nation must be strongest when the storms are at their worst.